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ABSTRACT

A recent study examined the socioeconomic status (SES), parent participation, teacher awareness, and academic achievement of 76 elementary school students. Results were obtained through interpretation of data and review of relevant literature. A strong positive correlation was found between a student's SES and academic achievement in school. Some findings attributed poor academic achievement in part to the fact that lower SES students have very poor attendance records. The literature and the reviewed study indicated that teachers' attitudes toward low SES students were not overly positive in regard to student achievement, and no specific strategies were used that could be identified as being geared for minority groups/low SES students. An examination of the training teachers received from colleges of education revealed that relatively little specific skill knowledge related to low SES students was provided. Recommendations for improving the training and the in-school experiences of teachers of low SES students emphasize the importance of involving parents with the school and in the education of their children. (JD)

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SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS, ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT AND TEACHER RESPONSE

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Summary of the Article

This article reports on a study done in 1981 regarding low socio-economic status children, academic achievement and parent involvement in school affairs. The relationships among these variables were identified and some possible new roles for classroom teachers are suggested. Implications for teacher education programs are also discussed.

Socio-economic Status, Academic Achievement and Teacher Response

Introduction:

The academic achievement or lack of achievement of the minority poor in America's schools remains today as one of the major failures of public education. Simply stated, as a group poor Blacks, Indians, and Mexican-American children do not achieve academic equivalence with their white middle class peers. In fact as these students proceed through our education system the achievement gap between the haves and have nots widens with each year as witnessed by standardized test scores in mathematics and reading. Compensatory education programs such as Headstart and DISTAR were originally developed to try and bridge this gap by providing disadvantaged youngsters with pre-school experiences equal to those received at home by middle class children. These programs are controversial at best and certainly have not eliminated the disparate achievement levels among various groups.

A recent study conducted in one Midwestern state using lower and middle class children in grades 4, 5, and 6 sheds some insights into this achievement conundrum, raises some important questions for teachers and teacher training institutions, and suggests some possible directions for the future.[1]

The Study

From a population of 148 fourth, fifth and sixth graders, 76 students were selected at random for intensive study. White, Black, and Native American students were represented in the sample. Socio-economic Status (SES) data on the parents were obtained and the children were rated as either lower or middle class. Using Ira Gordon's model[2] and Shelton

and Dobson's description,[3] the extent and degree of parent involvement in school affairs was determined. The California Achievement Test (1970)[4] was used to assess academic achievement and The Jesness Behavior Checklist (1970)[5] was used to determine how each student felt about himself, reaction to peers and reaction to school authority figures. The data were analyzed using (1) Point Biserial correlation, (2) Fisher's exact probability test and the (3) Two-way Chi Square. From the review of literature and from the actual results of this study a number of findings regarding SES, parent participation, teacher awareness, and academic achievement can be described. Furthermore, these findings suggest implications for both teacher training institutions and classroom practices. The findings and implications will be discussed under the headings of three often asked questions.

Question 1 - What is the relationship between socio-economic status and academic achievement?

The literature reveals a strong positive correlation between a student's SES and the degree of academic achievement attained in school. For example, early studies done by Brazzul,[6] Montague,[7] and Charters[8] showed SES to be one of the most reliable predictors of grades and achievement levels. A 1972 study by Boocock[9] found that:

> The family characteristic that is the most powerful predictor of school performance is socio-economic status (SES): The higher the SES of the student's family, the higher his academic achievement (p. 36).

Similar results were found by Welch[10] in 1974 and by Hennessey[11] in 1976. The present study done among lower and middle class students also confirmed this relationship: The students described as lower SES had significantly lower achievement levels.

Related to the concept of achievement is school attendance. Bartlett[12] found, what many educators would suspect, that:

> While it is possible for an absent student to make up much of the school work missed, it is impossible to completely compensate for absence from classes. Students who have good attendance records are most likely to achieve higher grades, and enjoy school life to a greater degree (p. 3).

Similarly, Sexton[13.] found:

> The worst attendance record was found among the lowest category of minority groups where under achievement was highest (p. 98).

The present study confirmed this also: the lower SES students had the poorest attendance records.

Question 2 - What are the attitudes and responses of classroom teachers towards low SES students?

The literature and this present study shows that there is a strong positive correlation between SES and academic achievement. It should be incumbent upon classroom teachers to understand this relationship and provide special support activities to the low SES student. However, such is not the case. Goldman,[14.] for example, found that many middle class teachers by their overt behavior patterns, rejected their lower class students. Green[15.] describes a not unusual situation in which a prospective teacher with a mediocre under-graduate and student teaching record was offered a probationary position in a school with a predominantly Negro population and high drop out rate, with the understanding that if she could succeed in this school she would be promoted to a higher prestige school within the system. This notion of new and inexperienced teachers being sent to the poorest schools as either a test or a punishment is also documented in Ravitz's study. Ravitz[16.] notes that such schools are often referred to by the teacher as "Siberias". Obviously teachers who hold such attitudes towards their students do disservice to the teaching profession.

Through the use of questionnaires and observation techniques it was determined that the teachers in this study:

(1) could identify low SES students and (2) did not hold negative attitudes toward them.

On the other hand, the teachers' attitudes were not overly positive in regards to student achievement; neutral would best characterize their views. Furthermore, no specific strategies or approaches were utilized that could be identified as being geared for the minority low SES students.

Question 3 - How do colleges of education prepare teachers towork with low SES children in the classroom?

All of the teachers studied in the present study and in past studies were products of teacher training institutions. Therefore, it is fair to ask, What type of training for working with low SES children do teachers receive? A look at the past, present and future trends in education provides part of the answer. Prior to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's Colleges of Education provided their students with few if any experiences or knowledge about specific approaches for teaching low SES minority children. At present education majors are required to take a few courses in their general and professional sequence which include such topics as learning styles, ethnicity and the schools, and self concept and achievement. But still relatively little specific skill knowledge related to the low SES students is provided. The future appears brighter however, mainly because of the recent (1979) Multicultural Standard for Accrediation of Teacher Education[17]. published by the National Council of Teacher Education (NCATE). This standard states that:

> The institution gives evidence of planning for multicultural education in its teacher education curricula including both the general and professional studies component.

Potentially this standard could stimulate colleges of education to institute new courses, add multicultural components to existing courses and develop more field based experiences of a multicultural nature.

In short it could help to fill a real gap in our current teacher training programs. However, a caveat is in order: reaction to the NCATE standard on Multicultural Education could consist of mere window dressing to cover up the problem or avoid confronting the real issues. If this occurs it would be a tragedy for an opportunity for real change would have been missed.

Recommendations:

1. The single most important factor in a child's public school education is the teacher. This is especially true for the minority child from a low SES background. It is time that teachers be especially trained and selected for working with these children. Such teachers would have to meet rigorous standards and be recognized as master teachers in their field. Furthermore, school systems and state departments of education must provide additional monetary incentives for such teachers. Without a new and radical approach to who teaches the minority poor, the cycle of repeated failures and frustrations will not be broken.

2. In addition, teachers in low SES schools must be provided with on-the-job experiences to further prepare them for dealing with the special needs of their pupils. During their daily schedule, time must be allocated for meeting with supervisors, community leaders, social workers, and of course parents to discuss common concerns which impact on education. Obviously this too would necessitate much organization and some additional funding support.

3. A more flexible school organization must be utilized for working with the low SES student. Perhaps some sort of non-graded school would be appropriate. Such a school would allow teachers greater opportunity to adapt their instruction to the individual child's rate of learning.

It would include more opportunities for individual work, place less pressure on the child to "keep up" with the others, remove the punitive threat of non promotion and collectively improve the child's self concept.

4. All teachers must be especially trained in the use of motivational techniques which improve academic achievement. During the past fifteen years a growing body of research tested knowledge has emerged under the heading of achievement motivational theory. Researchers such as McClelland,[18.] Atkinson,[19.] and Weiner[20.] have written extensively in this area yet the present study revealed that none of the teachers were even familiar with this research and had never been exposed to it during their teacher training preparation. The demonstrable link between motivation and achievement and the practical classroom activities that have been developed in this area should be an integral part of teacher education.

5. The literature from sociology and psychology is replete with studies which demonstrate the importance of the home-school link for improving academic achievement. Ebersole[2.] puts it succinctly when he states:

> The ring of respect encircling students, and teachers, and parents is an essential relationship for effective learning. A break anywhere in the circle results in a breakdown in student performance. If there's close communication, cooperation, sincere caring, however, there seems to be no limit to what might happen--students learn more, teachers are more fulfilled, and parents feel better about their children and themselves (p.v)

The present study done by Shakiba-Nejad[1.] revealed parent involvement in school activities as the single best motivating factor for increasing children's achievement levels. The more parents were involved in school affairs, the more knowledgeable they became regarding the academic needs of their children and subsequently the better able they were to support their children's efforts for success. Yet typically the lower class parents, for a variety of reasons, are the least likely to be involved

in school activities. The school is often viewed by them as an alien middle class environmnet. Clearly therefore teachers and administrators who work with low SES pupils must devote a greater amount of their time and creative ingenuity towards involving parents in the school and establishing that all important cooperative link with the home. Similarly teacher training institutions must devote some time to instructing new teachers-to-be how to establish close working ties with the parents of the children they will teach.

Conclusion:

SES is an extremely important variable in the achievement equation. All teachers, but especially those who work with the minority poor must understand this. Furthermore, mere understanding is not sufficient; teachers must actively change their approach to instruction. Teacher training institutions must also change to meet these demands. To pretend that all students can be treated alike and that all will achieve equally well is to ignore the preponderance of research data that is already available. Without new approaches to the way we educate the minority poor, the negative effects of low SES on academic achievement will never be overcome.

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